Fact Sheet
Steller Sea Lion / Alaska Groundfish Fisheries Management

- NOAA Fisheries scientists have been using the best available scientific and commercial information to investigate the relationship between the nation's largest fisheries, Alaska groundfish, and the continued decline of the endangered Steller sea lions. Findings indicate that although pollock fishing probably did not cause the initial decline of Steller sea lions, continued harvest of large amounts of pollock in important Steller foraging areas appears to contribute to the current decline and is likely to jeopardize the Steller population or adversely modify its critical habitat.

- Agency scientists say the fisheries are not overfished. Fishermen harvest only 18 percent of the available pollock from the stock each year. The problem is the increasing proportion harvested from sea lion critical habitat. In recent years, a large fraction of the annual pollock catch was harvested in critical areas. Scientists question whether pollock are sufficiently available for sea lions in critical areas during times of the year that are important for sea lion survival. Fewer young Steller sea lions are surviving to become adults to reverse the population's decline.

- In the past, 40% to 70% of the pollock was harvested from Steller sea lion critical habitat. Harvest of pollock from critical habitat may have caused localized food shortages. The American Fisheries Act has reduced the competition between Steller sea lions and pollock fisheries by spreading the pollock fishery over time and area to reduce localized food shortages.

- Pollock has always been an important food source for Steller sea lions in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. Studies indicate that historically the Steller diet was more diverse; however, pollock is currently a major food item available to and selected by Stellers over much of their range.

- The Alaska pollock fisheries are worth well over $200 million as sold off the fishing vessels, and $673 million as processed products (surimi and roe). The fishery is managed by the National Marine Fisheries Service based on management plans submitted by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council through a complex allocation negotiated among fisheries components. The total quota established by the Council for 1998 was 2.5 billion pounds for the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and 270 million pounds for the Gulf of Alaska.

- The fishery targets roe-bearing pollock in mid to later January. In 1996, the roe season was valued at over $395 million as processed product, about half the value of the pollock fishery.

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- Many scientists attribute part of the decline in the Steller population to an environmental regime shift in Alaskan waters that resulted in declines of herring and capelin in the late 1970's, another important food source for Stellers. Most research on the causes of the decline of sea lions has focused on a decrease in juvenile survival and reduced reproductive rates of adult females. Both factors are likely related to diet.

- The agency's most recent Steller sea lion stock assessment finds the population continues to decline from 110,000 in 1978 to less than 40,000 today. Counts of adults and juveniles declined by 72 percent between the late 1970's and 1990, dropped another 25 percent through 1996, and fell another 9 percent in the past two years. Similarly, pup counts dropped by 19 percent between 1994 and 1998.

- Steller sea lions were listed as threatened in 1990. The Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska Stellers were listed as endangered in 1997 due to continued declines. Summer 1998 surveys indicate continued Steller decline.

- Fisheries Service managers have responded to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act which requires the development of reasonable and prudent alternatives to the current fishery management actions to ensure that the fishery does not jeopardize Stellers.

- The Fisheries Service must ensure that adverse effects of the fishery are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Stellers. NMFS is continuing to analyze the fisheries as data becomes available.

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